COVER SHEET

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School Curriculum as Cultural Commodity in the Construction of Young People's Post-School Aspirations[1]

Bill Atweh, Sandra Taylor and Parlo Singh

Faculty of Education - Queensland University of Technology

b.atweh@qut.edu.au, s.taylor@qut.edu.au. p.singh@qut.edu.au

This paper reports on initial findings from a project funded by the Queensland Studies Authority and conducted by researchers based at the Queensland University of Technology. The study investigates the effect of curricular pathways on the construction of young people's identities, in particular how young people talk about post school options. The study involved case studies of 12 schools, including schools located in rural, urban and diverse socio-economic areas. Data for the study were collected by: (1) interviews with key curriculum players in the respective schools and (2) focus groups with students and teachers. In this paper, we will identify some of the emergent issues in the literature as well as present preliminary findings from the focus groups conducted with students in the selected schools. In particular, we will (a) examine the spread of choices that students are presented with and some limitations on these choices, (b) examine the processes that students follow in making their subject choices and their implications for the needed scaffolding offered to them, and finally (c) examine some concerns expressed by students that raise questions about the structure of senior schooling in Queensland.

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Schooling years are designed to equip students with skills, knowledge and dispositions to meet their needs for future citizenship and participation in economic life (including employment and careers). Undeniably, students today experience a more complex schooling system than previous generations: one that presents them with more choices and decisions to be made with regard to choices of subjects, that in turn are connected with post school options and future life choices. Increasingly schools in Australia are becoming aware of their role in assisting students to make informed choices about future studies and work options during various stages of their educational journey. Such assistance may be indirect, in terms of establishing curriculum structures that allow students to make choices with set alternatives, or direct, in terms of career education or less formal advice given to students to assist them individually in making their subject choices and/or decisions about post school destinations and career choices.

We base our discussion in this context on the dialectic relationship between subject selection and the students' identities. Students make choices based on their constructions of their own abilities, strengths and aspirations and these curricular choices in turn provide them with opportunities to develop certain expertise in certain areas as well as limit (or open new) possibilities for their future. Hence, an in-depth study of the process of subject selection in the senior years is crucial for the design of an education system that better meets their needs. In this paper we will: (a) examine the spread of choices that students are presented with in the Queensland education system and some of the limitations on these choices; (b) examine the processes that students follow in making their subject choices and the implications for appropriate scaffolding to be offered to them; and finally, (c) examine some of the concerns expressed by students that raise questions about the structure of senior schooling in Queensland.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policy context

Since the 1970s there have been significant changes in participation and retention rates in schooling in Australia. Many more students are now completing schooling and participating in some form of post-compulsory education. These changes have in part resulted from the restructuring of the youth labour market; young people are staying at school longer, partly due to the lack of opportunities in full time paid work. At the same time, policy initiatives at federal and state levels over this period have focused on

improving student retention rates, with the aim of enhancing economic productivity through the production of a more highly trained and skilled workforce.

These trends, seen in Europe, USA, UK, and Canada, as well as in Australia (Dwyer & Wyn 2001), have had major implications for young people's transitions from school to work. Several major reviews of research highlight the fact that transitions from school to work are now more protracted, fragmented and in some ways less predictable than in the past (Cieslik & Pollock 2002, Furlong & Cartmel 1997, Te Reile 2004a, 2004b). These trends are often seen as related to the 'risk', 'uncertainty' and 'individualisation' which are said to characterise societies in late modernity (Giddens 1990, Beck 1992). Other writers (eg Furlong & Cartmel 1997) emphasise the continuities in young people's experiences, particularly in relation to the reproduction of inequalities through schooling, where class and gender remain significant to educational experiences and outcomes. Furlong and Cartmel believe that the significance of individual reflexivity in late modernity has been over emphasised, and point out that Beck draws attention to the ways in which the processes of individualisation are tightly constrained (1997, p. 113). Similarly, Nayak's (2003, p. 169) study which explored the experiences of 'white youth' in the north of England suggests that 'rather than providing an increased freedom of opportunity' the 'de-industrial landscapes' of Northern England offer only 'unemployment, insecurity and a sense of dislocation'.

Relevant policies

In Australia, the Taskforce on Transition from School developed an Action Plan to implement the Ministerial Declaration, *Stepping forward: improving pathways for young people*, with the goal of improving social, educational and employment outcomes for all young people (MCEETYA 2002). The key areas of action around which the plan has been developed are:

- *Education and training as the foundation for effective transition for all young people*
- *Access to career and transition support*
- *Responding to the diverse needs of young people*
- *Promulgating effective ways to support young people*
- *Focused local partnerships and strategic alliances.*

In Queensland, one of the goals of *Queensland State Education 2010* was:

- *…maximising the number of students who complete year 12 with a foundation for later learning and the skills to be part of a competitive workforce in the knowledge economy. (Education Queensland 2000, p. 30)*

Following QSE 2010, selected initiatives were taken up in *Queensland the Smart State. Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (Queensland Government, 2002). The consultation document for this policy direction again stressed the need for skills for the knowledge economy and highlighted the need for all students to complete 12 years of education:

> *Our young people matter. We must do what we can to keep all of them in some form of learning or earning. We must take responsibility for what happens to*

> *young people now, so that they can lead satisfying lives and fully contribute to our society and economy. (p. 7)*

Research on school retention and completion

A number of large scale studies in Australia have explored young people's post school destinations (Lamb 2001), and their attitudes and aspirations (James 2000). Others investigated post school options and pathways in relation to particular social factors – e.g. socioeconomic background (ACER & Smith Family 2004, Teese 2000), gender (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000, Gilbert & Gilbert 2001), Indigenous backgrounds (Marks & Fleming 1999, Parente, Craven, Munns & Marder 2003), rural and remote locations (Alston & Kent 2003, Whiteley & Neil 1998); and the influence of parental and family networks, peers, and teachers.

The ACER/DEET series of Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth (LSAY), a detailed series of studies of subject choices and transitions to post school education and employment is particularly relevant to this study. These studies show that subject choices in senior secondary school are related to differences in access to higher education, vocational educational and training, and to employment outcomes (Fullerton & Ainley 2000). These choices reflect social backgrounds of students, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, from private schools and from non-English speaking backgrounds more likely to participate in courses leading to higher education and the professions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to participate in courses leading to VET or to enter the labour market with no further formal education or training.

Lamb and Ball (1999) examined the patterns of course enrolments in year 12 and the consequences for education, training and work experiences post school. They concluded that 'after controlling for background, achievement and school differences, there remain large variations in the likelihood of participating in further education and training based on subject choice in year 12. These findings show that student course taking is a strong predictor of outcomes' (p. v).

Other research reports that the main reasons students give for leaving school early are to search for work and lack of interest in school work (Teese 2000). Te Riele and Crump (2003) also report, based on a NSW study, that disadvantaged students often find the curriculum irrelevant or too hard. An NBEET report (1995) also concludes that:

> *Students who enter the labour market before year 12 are driven by their experience of school, rather than the extent of their knowledge about, or attitudes towards, careers and options for post-school education and training. Young people who are performing badly at school are most likely to leave school early. (p. x)*

Richard Teese's research provides further insights - highlighting the importance of how well a student is achieving as well as the subjects studied:

> *The flight from school involves a rejection of the performance demands of the curriculum - and the sense of failure which the curriculum often brings ... Social integration in school is not curriculum neutral. The upper secondary*

> *curriculum is hierarchical with high stakes and low stakes subjects. The level of the curriculum that a student occupies- academic, general, or vocational, university approved or terminal – and how well a student is achieving at that level influence whether a student feels at home or out of place. … In general as achievement declines, integration weakens and dropping out becomes more and more likely.* (Teese, 2000, p. 50)

More recently, Teese (2004) has reported that the two major reasons for leaving school early are demand for work or an income, or lack of interest in school work. He also reported large variations by gender, region, socioeconomic background and Aboriginality.

Clearly, various factors are interacting to shape students' post school aspirations and choices – curriculum and school factors, as well as the social background of the student. For example, Dwyer and Wyn (2001: 46) conducted an extensive review of research on youth and schooling across the US, UK, Canada and Australia and suggest that there are at least four major factors that contribute to early school exit: (1) an adolescent's developmental self, particularly as a learner; (2) role conflict within the school, and between the school and other contexts; (3) cultural dissonance between students and staff; (4) structural deficits and limitations within the school (in particular), and within families and communities. These factors overlap in unpredictable ways to influence whether students disengage from schooling at an early age and/or exit completely. In addition, Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, and Rumberger (2004) provide a useful summary of research on the key factors affecting retention and participation in Australia, and note that there is little difference in the patterns between the states and territories. They emphasise that the research literature highlights the fact that early leavers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of low achievers, and highlight the importance of the curriculum and schooling experience:

> *Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to build satisfactory teaching relationships removes the possibility of successful learning which is the most important intrinsic motive for staying on at school. Economic pressures to find work and earn a living may hasten early leaving, but where a positive experience of learning has not been established, resistance to these pressures is often ineffectual. (2004, pp. ix- x)*

Research on school programs

Vocational education and training

Some studies have examined the participation and achievements in VET of young people who do not complete school (Ball & Lamb 2001). Ball and Lamb (1999) have also studied the senior secondary curriculum choices likely to lead to an apprenticeship or other post-school VET.

Most of the research on school programs and curriculum initiatives relevant to this study relates to the impact of the introduction of vocational education and training (VET) programs in schools. VET-in-schools programs are increasing in importance relative to the traditional school to VET pathway (Knight 2004). Some studies have investigated the issue of how well the development of vocational learning in schools has helped to keep young people engaged in education. For example, Knight reports that vocational learning in schools can function as an equity strategy performing a

'preventative function' by allowing students 'to develop work-related skills while still advancing their general education' (p. 194). He continues: 'If broader, more flexible education and training encourages young people to stay at school longer, then there are potential benefits in both the general education and vocational learning areas' (p. 195).

Another study of VET in school programs concluded that '[f]or most, VET plays an essential role in managing diversity, in improving learning and in securing a range of good outcomes for school leavers' (Polesel, Helme, Davies, Teese, Nicholas, & Vickers 2004, p. 8). But these researchers report that problems remain concerning resourcing and institutional relationships between schools and TAFE. They argue that the student and their needs must be the focus of policy: 'Unless adequate acknowledgement of the need to provide high quality VET in a range of settings (and not just in those where it is easy) is made, access to VET will continue to be constrained for many young people in Australian schools' (p. 9).

Career guidance

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training (1997) reported that careers guidance in schools was very poor. In a Queensland study, Patton and McCrindle (2001) investigated the role of career information and vocational guidance in students' post-school planning, and reported that students requested more information on their options. Similarly, the former TEPA conducted a number of research studies in Queensland between 1996 and 1999 to ascertain what information was needed for key stake holders in relation to transition of students from year 12 to tertiary education. Findings suggested that many students would have preferred more assistance when in year 10 and felt that year 12 was too late to be making course and career decisions (Whiteley & Neil 1998).

Key issues emerging from the review of literature:

1. There is a mismatch between established models of transition and actual attitudes, choices and experiences of young people themselves, with assumptions often being made about 'normal' biographies and linear transitions and choice, in contrast to the current context of risk and uncertainty, and 'choice biographies' (Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Nayak, 2003). Rather than being seen as a linear developmental stage to be passed through, transition is more appropriately conceptualised as an active process negotiated by young people which will differ for different groups of young people. In this context, Slade and Trent (2000) emphasise the need for those working with young people to recognise their achievements (for example, their experiences in the work place) and 'the unrecognised CV' of many of them (p. 227). On this point, Dwyer and Wyn (2001, p. 24) suggest that :

> *One of the implications of the contemporary pattern for young people to mix school and work is that, rather than school being a preparation for work, the workplace is providing young people with a pragmatic perspective on education. … The evidence suggests that young people are developing a perspective on schooling in which education is only one of a number of options which they are managing. Furthermore, in making decisions about how they will manage these options, they are making very pragmatic choices about which school subjects are relevant to them.*

2. There is much policy hype about the 'knowledge economy' and the need for youth to gain more education/training to compete for high skilled, specialist jobs in this economy. Much of this hype has been in response to the collapse of the full-time youth employment market. Government policies advocating more education and training have led to the delayed entry of youth into the full-time job market, and thus have constituted a generation 'on hold'. While students with higher qualifications are more likely to get jobs, more education does not guarantee jobs, nor does it guarantee highly skilled jobs. According to Dwyer and Wyn (2001) people generally tend to be overqualified for the work that they are doing. This in turn, creates a paradox between the ambitions fuelled by the rhetoric of government policy and advice of educators and the realities of the market-place. It is imperative to question policy rhetoric which makes assumptions about 'one-to-one links between the two markets' of education and the workplace, and in particular generates expectations that education is a vehicle for upward social mobility 'at precisely the time that global economic developments have forced a far-reaching reshaping of the nature and conditions of the workplace at a national level" (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001: 63).

3. Major job growth has been in the unskilled, routine, services sector rather than in the non-routine, highly specialized knowledge categories (Castells, 2000a, 2000b; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Nayak, 2003). Students require secondary school qualifications or equivalent to compete for these jobs. From this perspective, what might be viewed as a progressive 'all inclusive' education and training policy may run the risk of becoming an exclusive policy because 'the attainment of a specific post-school education/training 'threshold' has been set up as a normative precondition for adulthood.' (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001: 65).

4. There is a need to take account of VET and employment opportunities which are realistically available. There are problems with raising the aspirations of students without realistically available opportunities (see Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). As Slack (2003) points out, decision making is a pragmatic rational process located within habitus: 'one of reconciling aspirations with opportunity'. Similarly, Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999) refer to the role of 'imagined futures' in decision making and boundaries which constrain opportunity.

5. There is a need to provide quality educational experiences which take account of student needs and experiences – it is not enough just to keep them at school. Lamb et al (2004) conclude that not all retention is 'good', and not all early leaving is 'bad'. They point out that some students who complete school have had an unsatisfactory experience of learning and of school and it is questionable whether their completing school was a useful exercise. They argue that the MCEETYA position which gives priority to quality education over completion as such is very relevant here.

They also argue that:

> *…the biggest single motive for early leaving is the demand for work. When this leads to work associated with a contract of training (particularly apprenticeship), parents and schools claim this as a successful outcome. Many young people who leave school early and enter an apprenticeship have had a positive experience of school and report favourable attitudes. From this point of view, too, the outcome could be considered positive and consistent with MCEETYA priorities. (p. 2004)*

Further, Lamb et al (2004) conclude that not all schooling provides 'clear and recognised pathways' beyond school, and not all 'clear and recognised pathways' are viable. They report that low achievers have weak transition outcomes: this means that retention should not be viewed as a goal in itself. They ask two significant questions: 'How robust in transition terms are all strands within the mainstream curriculum? Do all strands represent high quality schooling?' (p. 147).

6. There is a need for high quality VET opportunities to be offered in a range of settings for all students, not just for the lower achievers.

7. There is a need for 'effective re-entry programs' for early school-leavers to return to education within five years of leaving. Re-entry education programs need to be accessible and organized in such a way that they take into account the post-school experience of participants, particularly in terms of interruptions to schooling (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001: 56).

METHODOLOGY: A Case Study of Queensland Schools

The study involved the collection of documentary and focus group interview data from a sample of 11 schools across Queensland. These schools were representative of the three sectors: Education Queensland, Independent and Catholic education. In addition, the sample of schools included those positioned in South-East Queensland, provincial and country areas, as well as schools situated in and high and low socio-economic locations.

School One	Catholic	SE Queensland
School Two	State	SE Queensland
School Three	Independent	SE Queensland
School Four	Catholic	SE Queensland
School Five	State	Country
School Six	State	Country
School Seven	State	Country
School Eight	State	Country
School Nine	Independent	Provincial
School Ten	State	Provincial
School Eleven	Catholic	Provincial

Identification of Case Study Schools: (a) collection of publicly available data on Education Queensland, Independent and Catholic schools from web-pages and annual reports to identify key schools that might constitute the representative sample, (b) Development of descriptive profile of these schools, (c) Informal meetings with relevant personnel of the Queensland Studies Authority in relation to project brief and selection of case study schools, (d) approach to case study schools through relevant channels and after ethical clearance forms were processed. This component of the project was mainly carried out by a senior research assistant under the direction of the investigators.

Focus Group Questions: The focus group questions were developed from a synthesis of the key themes emerging from the research literature, as well as preliminary discussions with key informants in the Queensland education authorities.

Student focus groups:

- What do you think you might do when you finish school, in terms of work or further study?
- What roles have other people, like parents, teachers, friends and the media, played in your decisions about what you want to do after school?
- What do you see yourself doing next year? What about in five years time?
- What subjects have you chosen to study, and how will these affect what you do after school?
- Do you work now? Can you describe your work, and how this has affected school subject choice, and post-school options?

Teacher focus groups:

- What do you think are the main issues facing senior students in relation to their post school options?
- What are the different factors influencing student choices about their post school options?
- How has curriculum been designed to cater for student needs in this school?
- How do curriculum choices affect students' post school options and pathways?
- Are there any initiatives to help inform students about their post school options and pathways?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Wide subject choices - Imagined or real?

Different schools investigated in this study follow different practices in terms of students' selection of subjects studied. Some schools offer students choices of subjects as early as Year 8 (the first year of high school in the Queensland system). Usually these are semester long modules. Some of these offerings are independent while others are sequential. Similarly, some offerings are required of all students – these typically include English, mathematics and science. However, at end of the period of compulsory education, Year 10, students have to make decisions whether or not they remain in school and what subjects they will study for the rest of their senior years.

In Queensland, senior schools offer three main types of subjects. Firstly, some school subjects, referred to as Board subjects (which reference to the Board of Senior School Studies that developed them), are designed at a state wide level and contribute to the Overall Performance (OP) rating of the student. Not all students finishing senior schooling need to obtain an OP rating. However, this score is used by universities to make their offers to school leavers into their courses. Secondly, schools offer some Board Approved subjects, also developed at a state level but these do not contribute to the OP ratings. Lastly there are school based subjects that are developed locally that may be offered on a range of topics including languages, career and trade based and

recreational courses. Some of these school based subjects lead to nationally approved skills certificates. While students' performance in these subjects is recorded on their Senior Certificate, they are not counted as part of the OP rating.

The spread of subjects offered to students depends to a large extent on the particular school and its context. In the focus groups, the interviewed students identified several restrictions to their freedom of choice from the pool of possible subjects.

First there were restrictions based on the school's ethos and focus. While most Queensland schools offer a range of subjects to an increasingly diversified student population, many remain differentiated based on their academic emphasis. Students from a large metropolitan private school that prides itself on its academic focus and achievement, noted that the school "doesn't offer a huge selection [because … it] only offers OP eligible subjects" (SFG, par. 832). While a student from a rural state school commented that "because living in, like the rural area, that you do - it's also expected that the majority of people will go into agriculture, trade and these things – … that's what the school concentrates on teaching you (SFG, par. 241)[2].

Often these school values were complemented by the values of the parents. While the majority of the students talked about support from their families and parents for their choices, only the students from the metropolitan private school mentioned in the previous paragraph talked about some direct encouragement, and in some cases pressure, from parents for certain choices of subjects. For example, when asked about any pressure placed on the students in their selection of subjects, one student relates her experience as follows:

251: Student:	*Maths C because you hear that aura about Maths C being extremely difficult only the crème de la crème do Maths C and then when got asked, all Mum said basically "You're going to have to do Maths C". And I thought, "Oh, okay." And I'm like, "Can I do it?" …*
254: Interviewer:	*If you didn't do Maths C, what would happen?*
255: Student:	*Well, maths C you need a lot of that for engineering. My grand-dad and great grand-dad well all [indistinct] and they're like - Maths C helps you a lot.*
256: Interviewer:	*Sure.*
257: Student:	*And Uncle M. does electrical engineering has to do Maths C.*
258: Interviewer:	*Sure.*
259: Student:	*Because there's a lot of maths in electrical engineering. (SFG 12).*

Another student from this school related the experiences of a friend as follows:

> *Some people are pressured by their parents. I heard them talking about it. Yeah, like someone um she has to do … she really wanted to do science …*

[2] It should be acknowledged that these two opinions are of some of the students themselves and not necessarily shared by the administration of either school.

> *That's like her dream career but she has to take all the … humanities … because it's sort of a family … tradition. (SFG 12, par. 363-375)*

The restriction of subject choices comes from other sources related to the requirements for the OP ratings. To obtain an OP rating, students need to choose a minimum of five subjects and undertake at least three semesters in Years 11 and 12 in those subjects. Quite a number of students expressed concerns about the restrictions imposed on them from these requirements. One adult student from a metropolitan senior secondary school, experiencing a conflict between their interest in certain subjects and the requirements of the OP ratings, urged the QSA [Queensland Studies Authorities, the body responsible for the administration of the OP], to accept a broader range of subjects as their board subjects" (SFG AD, par. 321).

Several students in the focus groups expressed misconceptions about the role of the OP in university entry. Many students were under the impression that obtaining an OP is the only way to enter a university. In reality, all universities in the state have several alternative entry requirements that are not based on an OP rating. One student from a provincial state high school related a certain amount of disdain when they found the facts about university entry:

> *I think when I was in grade 11 basically I was told that if I wasn't eligible, I wasn't able to go to university. And then when I was looking through the QTAC book … I found out that you could still get into university which no-one ever really told me, so I figured that out by myself" (SFG 12, par. 37).*

Similarly there were misconceptions about the level of OP required for entry to the different university courses. Each Queensland university determines a cut off OP rating for each of their courses. There is some general perception that these cut off points are determined by the level of difficulty of the course. In reality, they are more determined by supply and demand as evidenced by the fact that different universities set different cut off levels, and that each university varies its cut off points from one year to another depending on the number of students needed or the number applying. Similarly, there are alternative entry pathways to university that allow students to enter a related less demanding course and transfer to the target course, often based on their performance at university or TAFE. Some students have to discover that for themselves. One student related how they had "just got told that you can if you don't go to the uni, you can upgrade through TAFE" (SFG 12, par. 444). Another said the university advisor she talked to sent her information, "I didn't know the OP that I need is a 5 and I probably won't get that, so I wanted to know what courses I could like do and then transfer into that and so she gave me all the information" (SFG 12, par. 443).

Other restrictions on student choices relate to combining OP eligible and non OP eligible subjects which arise from the time tabling practices of many schools. Increasingly schools are offering programs that combine work based employment with formal school studies in the form of traineeships or apprenticeships. While the practices of how they are managed vary from one school to another, in general students spend a day or more in the work place and study 4 days in the school. However, in the case of many schools, OP eligible subjects are scheduled 5 days a week. This implies that students intending to obtain an OP rating are allowed to do

work placements only if they can fit these in outside of school hours. One student at a rural school related her experiences in a previous school:

> *I've already - in the last few - in my old school … we did a thing [where] the whole school … all the seniors got Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons off and you could choose what you wanted to do there and I chose certificate II in engineering and so last - the half of last year - every day I went down to TAFE until about like 4.30, 5 o'clock and I've already actually got level II, certificate II engineering so I've already done first year apprenticeship and as well I can get I'm going for an OP as well. So that's pretty handy (SFG 12, par. 408).*

Another practice in many schools that may restrict choices is the presentation of subjects on different lines on the timetable. Often this is done for better management of the school's resources and the efficient distribution of teaching staff responsibilities. While care is often taken to minimise difficulties to students, quite a number of students in the focus groups raised this as a limiting factor in their subject choices. Some schools allow students to study a subject from another line of their choice; however they have to study it independently during their spare time, with the teacher occasionally checking on their progress.

> *In previous years I found that. Like, I wanted to do Music and Drama but they were in the same line. (SFG 12, par. 59).*

> *I chose Home Ec on that line even though I didn't really want to do it because I didn't want to do the other subjects.(SFG 12, par. 52)*

Finally, relevant to the question of choices and their restrictions, one way to cater for a wider student's interests within the limited resources of the school is to allow students to do some subjects in the external mode of study. While some schools use such an approach, students did not always feel well supported in such modes of study.

> *I found when I did year 10 and 11 that way - that's really quite difficult. (SFG AD, par. 206)*

> *I did Japanese through distance education. The first year was a bit hectic because I was doing it out of school because the time table …. Yes. So I was doing 2 or 3 hours after school staying back till 5 or 6 Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, so about 6 hours in total …. I dropped at the beginning of this year, so yeah. (SFG AD, par. 568-572)*

Hence, while a variety of subjects are in principle available to students in Queensland schools, there are several restrictions on their choice of subjects. Arguably, some of these restrictions arise from the relative cultural value of the different subjects in the eyes of the school and parents, while others stem from limited resources of the schools. While the OP regulations and school timetabling practices may satisfy the needs of many students, further examination of these practices on students' choices is needed. Further, additional support, both at a school and system level, is needed for alternative means of study, such as external studies. This kind of additional support may benefit students from smaller schools, as well as students who have special curricular interests and needs.

Decision making: Directed or multidimensional?

Most schools provide explicit guidance to students in terms of selection of senior school subjects. For example, all of the schools visited for this research study organised special programs or activities in Year 10 to assist students in their subject choices. These included parent-teacher-student interviews and/or information booklets explaining the available subjects. Some schools allowed students to complete short versions of some senior subjects during the last semester of Year 10. The focus of these activities or programs was on the career aspirations of the students, their ability and performance in previous subjects in the school, and the post school options that the student may want to follow. What do students say about the criteria that they have used to make their subject selection?

As might be expected, many students choose subjects that directly relate to their future aspirations in terms of further study and career options. School subjects can be related to future careers and further study options in one of two ways. Firstly, some subjects are seen as pre-requites for certain careers. Although high school subjects as prerequisites are being minimised by many universities, some students are still told that to study medicine you need biology, and to study engineering you need the highest mathematics subjects. Secondly, rightly or wrongly, some students and their teachers are under the impression that studying some subjects rather than others contributes positively to the OP ratings. One student explained his choice of subjects as follows: “Firstly one subject [I chose] was a requirement to get into medicine. The other subjects would just get me the best OP because they had the best average last year and the year before” (SFG 12, par. 19).

However, further studies and career aspirations as reasons to select particular senior subjects are often balanced by an intrinsic interest in the subject or its content and the student’s ability in that area:

> *What your're interested in mostly, and how good you are at certain things - certain subjects. That's probably the biggest factor in deciding what you will do after high school. Pretty much what you're passionate about is pretty important. You don't want to be stuck with something that you're not going to like doing for a while or as a career. (SFG 12, par. 11*
>
> *I just chose music [as] I was good at it; Drama because I loved it. (SFG 12, par. 126)*
>
> *That's why I chose a very wide range of subjects. I left out the Chemistry. I took Physics, Biology, Legal and Modern History, but I still would have liked something like Home Economics or Food Preparation - I love cooking. And I think it's important that you have a subject which you find fun. Or Art. Or Music is you're musical. (SFG 12).*

While some students might be happy to select a wide range of subjects based on their needs for future and their immediate interest, the schools may have different criteria that give a priority to subjects that assist the student towards specific targets. One student from a metropolitan private school related her experience that illustrates this potential conflict:

> *I think to be honest there were a couple of people in the school administration who when you were choosing your subjects - kind of especially me because I've got the craziest combination of subjects - it doesn't really match up or really lead to anywhere - who kind of gave me funny looks and asked, "What are your plans?" …. And I mean a direct quote it was, you know, "That's a ridiculous combination" ... But I suppose that comes from the school, rather than it comes from any sort of program with the QSA. (SFG 12, pars. 149-160)*

However, as discussed below, in many cases students have little idea about their future plans for work or study. In these cases their choice of subjects was based on keeping their options as open as possible. Even in cases where the student had a fair idea about what they might like to pursue career-wise, this strategy was used to allow for any contingencies resulting from a change in aspirations at a later time. Not surprisingly, mathematics and science are two subjects that are often chosen because of their potential usefulness to "keep the options open".

> *I didn't know what I wanted to do and I still don't. I sort of just picked straight Maths and Science because it gives me plenty of options. [With them] I can get into just about anything. (SFG 12, par. 67)*

> *[I decided] to go for an OP. I don't know, because I.....oh, my Mum told me to go for it just in case like I cut off my hand or something in carpentry - Keep other doors open so ...I don't know. Because if anything happened to me I could do something else I suppose. (SFG 12, par. 73-75).*

In many cases, however, the criteria used by students in their subject selection is less focused and (what adults may consider) rational. Some students chose subjects based on the reputation of the teacher or their experience with them. They avoided subjects taught by teachers who they did not like, and chose subjects that were taught by teachers who are known to be student-friendly. Other students select subjects based on their reputation of being easy or demanding less work. Speaking about her subject choices, one student justified her decision as follows "I know that biology is a lot more work than [Business Organisation and Management] and I think it's a lot more pressure" (SFG 11, par. 578). In another school teachers noted the tendency of some students to select the same subjects as their peers. One student from that school specifically recalled, "We're told not [to make decisions about subjects] just because we've got friends in our school who want to do them" [SFG 10, par. 315].

We note two observations about how students make decisions about their subject choices and how schools scaffold their decisions. Firstly, students use/ draw on multidimensional criteria in making their selections. Rightly so, we may add. Secondly, based on this, the kind of advice that is based solely on career planning may not be particularly effective or useful for students. Student scaffolding in some schools is based on the students identifying their future plans and then selecting subjects that may contribute to the achievement of these plans. Perhaps, a more effective way is for the students to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different subjects based on a balance between their interests, previous performance as well as their actual or possible aspirations for the future. .

Subject selection: Opening options or locking them in too early?
In Queensland schools, by the end of Year 10, when students are around 15 years old, they face decisions about subject selection that, at the minimum, locks them (as determined by the regulations governing the OP ratings discussed above) for the rest of their senior schooling, and may determine their post school options. At least that is how many teachers and students see it. Undoubtedly, students appreciate the seriousness of these decisions, and schools also take them seriously - as demonstrated by the scaffolding programs and activities in many schools visited. However, a large number of students interviewed expressed serious concerns about this.

There is an assumption that students' identities in terms of their strengths, interests and their long term aspirations are sufficiently developed at this level for them to make informed and realistic choices. However, a student from a provincial state high school stated: "I think it's unfair to ask somebody in year 10 when you're 14/15 - unfair to ask a 15-year-old what you're going to be doing when you're 30 years old because you've got to choose your subjects NOW (SFG 12, par. 104). Many of the participating students talked about "changing their mind" many times about subjects and pathways during the senior years. We include a few of examples in the words of the students to illustrate the strength of their concerns.

> *I just thought it was ridiculous that---it's silly that at 15 we have to decide that the subjects we're doing for the next two years will ultimately decide what we're going to do for the rest of our lives. At 15 I had no idea what to do. (SFG 12, par. 126).*
>
> *By the end of year 10 you should---you're meant to know what sort of way you want to go. (SFG 11, par. 98)*
>
> *But then you get people who change their mind all the time. I change my mind every day. (SFG 12, par. 496)*
>
> *I changed my idea of what I want to do with my life every couple of weeks - so in the end I just decided. I actually changed my subjects halfway through year 11 as well for one of them. I initially started with Maths C and physics because I wasn't really interested in the sciences but physics was more maths related, so I was interested in that. And then [I considered] Business Organisation and Management and art but I changed art to legal studies halfway through year 11 and that's probably one of the best decisions I've made, because I really enjoy legal studies now. (SFG 12, par. 93).*

While in principle students have a chance to change the subjects studied in Year 11 and 12, in practice this is often difficult. First, there is the OP rating requirements that a minimum of 3 semesters should be studied in the particular subjects for them to count for the rating. Similarly, 5 such board subjects need to be completed for a student to be eligible for the rating. It is not uncommon for students to commence Year 11 with 6 subjects. Hence, students have a limited leeway to drop a subject or change into another one by the middle of Year 11 and still be eligible for an OP rating.

Further, some subjects are designed to be sequential, making it more difficult for students to commence them in the middle of Year 11. One student, when asked if it was still possible to change subjects, said "Well, it might be for me. Like if I changed to biology now will I be able to cope or be able to catch up? (SFG 11, par. 578). Another adult student from a metropolitan senior school related their experience as follows:

> *Because I didn't do legal studies in year 11, I wasn't allowed to do it in year 12. Like, even if I'd done a lot of follow-up, like reading on it or whatever, to try to get myself up to scratch, I wasn't---and so that sort of bugs me: that you couldn't really change halfway through. Even though all the work in year 11 on that subject as in Ancient History was formative and the year 12 work was summative, that did sort of upset me because that was one of the ones I wanted to do (SFG AD, par. 332).*

Students feel the pressure of having to make a decision at this early stage, and by the idea, put forward in some schools, that their decisions are to be binding if they choose to be OP eligible.

> *Interviewer:* *Do you feel that you have to make up your mind by the end of year 12; or do you see your decision as being something that could go on after that?*
>
> *Student 1:* *We really need to make it by THIS year so we can choose subjects that help us with what we want to be. … Because we have to choose subjects and like, they say that it's really crucial that you choose the right subjects so that you can get into the course that you want to do at uni, so it means that you have to know what you want to do at uni in year 10. (SGF 11, par. 93-97).*

The price of such limited flexibility for students changing subjects can be heavy.

> *Well, I thought I wanted to do something in Law initially, then I took up Legal Studies and that changed my mind. I changed my mind dramatically and now I want to open up my own business or something. And I changed out of a Business Communication class because it wasn't my thing really, and I went to Ancient History, and now I've been trudging through that for the last two years and I'm never going to use it again. (SFG 12, par. 93)*

Finally, it is important to point out that students change subjects in schools not only because their interest changes, but at times because of the incomplete information that they have received about their subjects or discovering that they really are not interested in that topic. One student decided to change her initial selection of multi-strand science because "I thought we were doing to do dissecting and stuff, but we ended up doing a lot of theory" (SFG 12, par. 57). Another student said "I chose Art initially, but I got in the first day and said - No. That's enough for me. I can't even draw. I'll do Ancient History - and I did" (SFG 12 par. 126).

In our view, these comments raise some important questions about subject selection at Year 10. Are the decisions that students have to face at this level of schooling

appropriate, considering that they are still developing in terms of their abilities and interests? Are these demands on students based on an old rationality, when senior schooling was seen mainly as university preparation for a relatively few academically oriented students? Undoubtedly, these are some of the issues that will be discussed in this project based on examination of other sources of data yet to be analysed.

DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, during the past three decades, the Australian student population in the senior years of schooling has changed considerably. Although the percentage of young people staying at school until year 12 varies from depending on a range of factors including economic conditions, available jobs and government policies, overall the number of students staying on in the post compulsory years has risen markedly since the 1970s and is much more diverse than in the past. In response to the diversification of the student population, the school curriculum, in particular the school subject offerings, has expanded. A wide range of subjects has been introduced together with increased flexibility in certification procedures, allowing students a greater choice of pathways and, at times, much earlier decisions about specialisation. In part, this research project has attempted to gauge students' views and experiences about the choices that are available for them and the decisions they make for/in the last two years of schooling. From the preliminary analysis of data, we make four observations.

First, all schools visited offer a range of subjects at the senior years and have implemented flexible programs that allow a range of options and pathways for their students. Some subjects are designed to directly lead into the OP rating, and consequently to direct university entrance, while others are more for personal development and/or career orientated. However, the actual choices available to an individual student vary - and this variation is based on factors other than the students own aspirations, interests and abilities. For example, the limitation of available options is partly due to the available resources in the school. The larger the school population, the wider the range of subjects that they can offer. However, the ethos and focus of the school, and parental values may also influence the subject choices that schools offer. In Queensland, schools remain differentiated on the value they place on pathways that are generally perceived as 'academic' and pathways that are generally perceived as career- or work-orientated. This may be a particular problem in situations where there are few high schools to choose from, such as in rural settings. Further, timetabling practices in many schools limit the combination of subjects available for an individual student. Clearly, there are financial and resources reasons behind some of these practices. However, their effect on the choices available for an individual student must be considered. Greater flexibility of subject choices may be achieved in the increased availability of externally offered subjects that are web-based and use telecommunication to support student's studies. Currently, these are under-developed in Queensland schools and are limited to students in isolated regions. Naturally, for such programs to be effective, sufficient resources are needed.

Second, subject choices for/in the senior schools are often constructed by the school and students as final and binding. Such choices are often based on limited information about university entry requirements and they do not take into account that in today's

work life it is very common for adults to under go more than one major change in direction in their careers and occupations. From this preliminary analysis, it is clear that students at Year 10 are at different levels of development in terms of their interests and career aspirations. Some students have a clear idea of the type of career that they would like to pursue. These students may be well placed to make decisions about whether or not to remain in school and about the type of subjects they would take. However, a large number of the students participating in the focus groups in this study are yet to determine their career aspirations. Some have identified wide shifts - from aspirations that require further academic training, to aspirations that may be best achieved through work related studies such as apprenticeships and traineeships. Many students expressed concerns as a result of the limited chances for changing subject choices during their senior studies. In particular schools should examine if their prerequisite requirements for senior level subjects are preventing students from pursuing their aspirations in the post school years. Similarly, the QSA may need to examine if a more flexible requirements for the number of subjects studied by students to be eligible for OP might meet the needs of more students.

Third, senior school students do use multidimensional criteria for selecting their subjects during the last two years of schooling. They seem to make their selection based on a combination of personal interests, perceived ability in the area, career aspirations, whether known of potential, as well as other constraints based on social factors such as workloads, peer pressure and attitudes towards the teachers. Moreover, students seem to be quite assertive in demanding change in subject selections within the limitations imposed on them by the system. Lastly, students seem to be comfortable to mix the so called ‘academic’ and ‘career oriented’ subjects, once again within the system limitations. Further, while most schools have scaffolding programs and activities to support students’ selection of subjects, the accuracy of some of the information given may limit the options of students and put undue pressure on them. There is a room for continual examination and improvement to the information that students receive - both about the subjects being offered during the senior years and the different post schooling pathways available to them.

Fourth, perhaps we can make an observation on one issue based on its absence from the data rather than its presence. In particular, we note that none of the transcripts analysed here contain a reference to students selecting subjects based on their contribution to their life as active members of society. Students discussed their interests, abilities, career aspirations and keeping options open as major factors in their selection of subjects. There were no references to selecting subjects that would help to prepare them for their future adult lives as citizens and as parents. This could be due to the type of subjects that are available in schools that are more focused on career and personal development, or on the scaffolding given to them by their teachers in the process of subject selection.

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